

THE JOY OF MATURE LOVE

John 15:11-13 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

18 August, 2002

All Rights Reserved

I. NIGEL MAKES A MAN

"She's had a hard time. Keep her sedated a little longer," the anesthesiologist said into the surgical suite as she backed out the door into the hall. Wheeling around and stripping off her rubber gloves at the same time, she was startled to look directly into Nigel's face. Most family members stayed in the waiting area, but Nigel could not prevent himself from standing right outside the door of the operating rooms.

The doctor said nothing as she brushed past him on her way to her next patient, but Nigel could not fail to see an unmistakable flash of sadness on her face, then pity, then that look of neutral professional composure.

Nigel's heart skipped a beat. "What kind of hard time?" he wondered. He returned to surgical waiting and sat down on a soft chair, trying to keep his mind from inventing all sorts of horrible things which might or might not be wrong with Sarah. As the anguish of unknowing flowed through him Sarah's surgeon appeared in the doorway.

"Your wife came through the procedure fine. I'll be down to discuss the full results with both of you after the sedative wears off, but I need to tell you some things as her husband. There is no easy way to say this, but the exploratory surgery shows that Sarah has cancer which has spread to many parts of her body. There are some experimental cancer treatments we can try, but you need to be realistic. Sarah will need all of the help and support you can give her."

The color drained from Nigel's face. "She's not my wife," Nigel said with a flat voice. "Not yet, anyway. We have been together for several years, and we talked about getting married, but we never got around to it."

"Please forgive me for assuming--but in any case, she needs you now more than at any time in her life. I'll be back to confer with both of you." The doctor was matter of fact. Nigel did not even see him leave the room.

At first, he sat unmoving. He saw himself in a detached way, as if he were watching himself in a movie. Then the anger began to build, his pores opened, and beads of sweat formed on his forehead. He began screaming silently inside his head, repeating over and over again: "I didn't sign up for this... I didn't expect this! I don't want this!"

But Nigel knew he wanted Sarah. At least he wanted that shockingly pretty blonde with the smooth skin, sparkling eyes, and megawatt smile. Now doubt and confusion began to mix into the cauldron of his anger. It seemed impossible that someone so young and full of life could

be so sick. When they had moved in together Nigel had pictured the immense pleasures of life together for a long time to come--the intimacy, and even more, the wonderful warm companionship of a relationship built on genuine friendship. They had been deliriously happy, and now it was all stolen from him by that dread disease.

The anger, fear, and confusion began to be over-flooded with self-pity. "I can't do this--it's not fair! I never asked to be someone's nurse!" Nigel's mind raced to work out a get-away plan. He would just disappear--drain the accounts, scoop up his things from their apartment, and just drive. What a feeling that would be--to get out of this prison of sorrow and someone else's sickness! "I need to take my life back," he thought. But he just sat there, unmoving, he knew not how long.

The longer he sat, the more ashamed he felt of his desire to run away. For no apparent reason, he remembered the Bible story of David and Goliath he had learned in Sunday School as a child. His teacher had said: "Real men face the giants." And Nigel knew what he had to do.

He walked right past the nurse in the recovery room, looked quickly around, and spotted Sarah already having awakened from the medication. He clasped her hand, kissed her softly, and said so only she could hear, "Sarah, you have cancer and you may not live." "I know," Sarah replied with no change in her expression.

Nigel looked into her doe-like eyes for a long moment, and the likely future unrolled before him like a scroll--all of the challenges, pain, griefs, and yes, a new kind of love. His lip trembled. "Will you marry me?"

Nigel and Sarah knew about *eros*, the love of intimacy. Many relationships today begin with the intense sweetness of the physical act of love. It seems that people are trying to figure out how little of a real relationship must be suffered in order to get to the sexual expression. But Nigel and Sarah also had *philia*, the love of companionship. They had been friends first, and because of that had an inkling of this first benefit of marriage: "It is not good for the man to be alone." It's not good for the woman, either! Companionship is the first benefit of marriage, not sexual intimacy.

Like so many people today, what Nigel and Sarah lacked was *agape*, the love of intelligent sacrifice. They had, though not in so many words, said to one another: "I want the pleasures of intimacy and the pleasures of companionship. You are the one I choose to gain these things for myself." They had never said: "I love you for yourself, and I am prepared to sacrifice myself for you." Thus when the physical ailment came--and they eventually come for us all--they had a crisis of relationship. Many couples break up just at this moment when they need each other the most because they never engaged *agape* love in their relationship. Just as children run away from work, people in immature love relationships run away from each other when things become difficult.

Many people enter churches the same way. Some are crass enough to be looking for the spiritual equivalent of sex: "Give me an experience of something that feels really good--or I'm leaving." Thus we have churches which major in entertainment, to the point of installing food

courts and Starbucks coffee shops. Other people at least get to the companionship stage where they develop friendships in the church. But this is still ultimately selfish. True Christian love is a giving thing. *Agape* is the mark of the true church.

II. "AS THE RUIN FALLS"

C. S. Lewis knew all about the selfishness which drives merely human love. We usually love others for the sake of what we can get from them. Never having married until late in life, Lewis discovered this great spiritual truth about himself as he learned to love his wife through the sorrows of cancer. His love for Joy Gresham became the window through which he came to understand *agape* love--the kind of love God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. He wrote a poem to describe the shock of learning just how much sin had tainted his love for his wife, and how much their marriage had taught him about the mature, Jesus kind of love.

As the Ruin Falls

All this is flashy rhetoric about loving you.
I never had a selfless thought since I was born.
I am mercenary and self-seeking through and through;
I want God, you, all friends, merely to serve my turn.
Peace, reassurance, pleasure are the goals I seek,
I cannot crawl one inch outside my proper skin;
I talk of love--A scholar's parrot may talk Greek,
But, self-imprisoned, always end where I begin.
Only that now you have taught me--
(But how late) my lack, I see the chasm;
And everything you are was making my heart
Into a bridge by which I might get back from exile,
And grow man, and now the bridge is breaking.
For this I bless you as the ruin falls.
The pains you give me are more precious than
All other gains.
(from *Poems*, by C. S. Lewis, ed. Walter Hooper, 1964, Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich)

Mature love hurts! Lewis described his realization that all his love before this point had been immature by saying that through his marriage to Joy and the suffering they shared he was caused to "grow man." After Joy's death Lewis wrote in *A Grief Observed* that he would gladly have traded places with her. The Apostle Paul said the same thing about the whole nation of Israel, most of which was unbelieving. If he could save them all by being damned himself he would have done it. Such a thing is impossible, of course, because God holds each person accountable for his own choices, but it expresses the depth of true sacrificial love. Lewis, in the last line of the poem, says that the love he and Joy shared--even with all the sorrows attached--was his greatest earthly joy. Isn't that worth seeking?

III. THE FULL MEASURE OF MATURE LOVE

Jesus Christ is the model of mature love for the whole world, embodying it in both his teaching and his life. He explained: "**This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you**" (John 15:12). How did Jesus love his disciples while they were on the earth together? What was his love like?

First, Jesus' love was a peaceful thing. He never thrashed them verbally for their foolish deeds and words, nor for their lack of faith. He used all of those things as opportunities for peaceful instruction. Jesus' love was also not demanding of others. Christ's message was and is, of course, demanding--he wants total commitment from everyone. But there is nothing selfish about that kind of demand. In his personal interactions, he loved out of a sense of the good of the other people. He would never stoop to withholding love in order to manipulate them for his own ends.

His love was focused on others. As a morally pure Jewish man and citizen of the nation of Israel, he never participated in sexual love because he was never married. He probably thought it would be unfair to marry some sweet Jewish girl only to have him nailed to a cross. Jesus did, however, know the love of companionship through the disciple John and others with whom he had powerful friendships. But the over-arching element of Jesus' love was *agape*, the love of intelligent sacrifice. When healings were needed, he healed people until he could do no more, curing thousands at a time. When the people needed instruction he taught until the sun went down. When, on several occasions, he taught until they had all skipped meals and were hungry, he fed them all by the miraculous multiplication of the bread and fishes. Mature love gives to others.

Mature love is also truthful. Jesus never misled anyone. Jesus' love is intelligent. His is no starry-eyed infatuation with people. He knows that we are all sinners. Mature love knows the worst and loves anyway.

This is a deep kind of love indeed. But how deep does it go? Jesus explained: "**Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends**" (John 15:13). Mature love goes all the way. Many of our popular songs say this, but none of them envision how far Jesus went to say "I love you" -- all the way to the cross. Few of us will be called upon in the course of life to make a similar decision. I pray that I am equal to this challenge should the time come for me to die for my loved ones.

But much more than a single act, this depth of mature love is a lifestyle. The one who is prepared to give all can and does give marvelous things short of that. Perhaps it should be said that only those who are prepared to die for their loved ones can learn about true mature love.

There are not long lines of people waiting to sign up for this way of life. It sounds too difficult! But Jesus explains that something indeed accrues to the benefit of the one giving all: "**These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full**" (John 15:11). Christ promises the obedient Christian who chooses a lifestyle of mature love an impartation of divine joy that surpasses all. Think of the most pleasant thing, the most joyous thing, the most intensely satisfying thing you have ever known, and the joy of the Lord surpasses it by far! We are granted tastes of it here on earth. Mature saints live for it, and

little else, and you can tell by how much they sacrifice for others. Perhaps they are just looking forward to the fulfillment of their salvation because the joy of the Lord will be the perpetual possession of the saints in heaven.

CONCLUSION

Nigel and Sarah, though arriving at the place backwards, are on the verge of entering the joys of mature love. For a couple in love, marriage is the beginning of that commitment. C. S. Lewis wrote an entire book describing how he came to Christ entitled *Surprised by Joy*, and this was long before he ever met Joy Gresham. Then God used their marriage to cause another surprise by joy, as they learned together of the joy of mature, sacrificial, intelligent love.

We must all start this process of learning by receiving the sacrificial love of Christ for ourselves. This is hard for many of us to do because we don't like to think that we needed that big of a sacrifice to make us OK with God. But it's true! And it's done already. All that is left is to open our hearts to him, confess our sins and our need for his forgiveness, and thank him for all that he has given us.

I think we all need to confess the sin of the desire to avoid the sacrifice of mature love. This clears the way for us to move into the fullness of the *agape* lifestyle, free to learn to love as Jesus loved. Christ's goal for us was crystal clear: "It is enough that the disciple become like his master." He's asking us to do the things we thought we would never do--the things we wish to avoid at all costs--and become like him: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." (John 3:16a). As we become like our Master in this way, we, too, will be granted the experience of being "surprised by joy!"